

SMALL LEARNING COMMUNITIES:
Implementing and Deepening Practice

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*Small Learning Communities:
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The Aim of This Publication

Small Learning Communities: Implementing and Deepening Practice brings together a knowledge base, tools, and resources for implementing and deepening small learning community practice. Its aim is to provide guidance to school staff and stakeholders in the demanding work of transforming 20th century comprehensive high schools into 21st century learning organizations.

All high school staff members have an interest in improving their practice. They want what is best for their students. They may envision adding small learning communities to their current offerings but not see the need to **transform** their school. However, the research base and professional consensus on which this publication rests provide encouragement for **improvement through transformation**. Research points out the failure of efforts to graft small learning communities onto traditional high school structures. In response, many small schools networks, as their names suggest, have sprung up to support school staff members who circumvent existing school structures and develop autonomous small schools.

SLCs: Implementing and Deepening Practice is designed to support well-planned, schoolwide reorganization into small learning communities. This guide offers five domains of research-based SLC practice and a cyclical process of improvement as a framework for organizing staff members' efforts to:

- rethink their current practice
- develop new structures and routines
- sustain long-term efforts to implement fully functioning and effective learning communities

1.

Small Learning Communities: The State of the Art

What's in a Name?

The term applied to the practice of organizing high schools into smaller units has undergone many changes over the last four decades. Houses and schools-within-schools came on the scene beginning in the 1960s; magnet programs, career academies, and mini-schools in the 1970s; charters in the late 1980s and 1990s; and finally small learning communities today. The evolution in terms is significant. It parallels development in our thinking about the crucial ingredients of effective education. The earlier terms emphasized small structure and curricular specialization and choice: both crucial to improved teaching, yet not the complete story. Small learning community, in contrast, encompasses these elements and more: a focus on the learner and learning, and in particular, the active and collaborative nature of teachers' and students' work.

Concurrent with the reorganization of comprehensive high schools into small learning communities are initiatives to create new small schools. The small schools networks emphasize the importance of autonomy and flexibility in functioning within large, rigid educational bureaucracies (Cotton, 2001). The small schools movement, however, also speaks to student-centered curriculum and instruction and collaboration among all members of the community (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Wasley, et al., 2000). Research and experience have led advocates of small learning communities and small schools to a shared, basic notion of small unit schooling:

An interdisciplinary team of teachers shares a few hundred or fewer students in common for instruction, assumes responsibility for their educational progress across years of school, and exercises maximum flexibility to act on knowledge of students' needs.

The term small learning communities is used here in its generic sense. It refers to all school redesign efforts intended to create smaller, more learning-centered units of organization including small schools and career academies.

Professional consensus. Just as small learning community research and practice have evolved so has professional consensus on secondary school redesign. Policy guidelines for middle schools began to incorporate recommendations for creating small learning communities in the 1980s and '90s and have sustained these guidelines to the present. *This We Believe*, the National Middle School Association's statement of their position on effective middle level school practice (1982; 1995; 2003), has long advocated teacher teams and organization of large middle schools into small learning communities: Their most recent position paper states: "The interdisciplinary team ... working with a common group of students is the signature component of high-performing schools, literally the heart of the school from which other desirable programs and experiences evolve (2003, p. 29)."

Breaking Ranks, a publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, called for the creation of “small units in which anonymity is banished” in 1996 (p. 45). *Breaking Ranks II* identifies seven cornerstone strategies for improving student performance, one of which is to: “Increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and other school personnel by reducing the number of students for which any adult or group of adults is responsible (2004, p. 6).” The other cornerstone strategies complement this reduction in the scale of schooling by establishing “the *essential* learnings a student is required to master” and by implementing “schedules *flexible* enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways student learn most effectively (p. 6).” Taken together, the strategies describe a form of school organization that diverges sharply from the traditional, comprehensive high school.

Five Domains of SLC Best Practices

In *New Small Learning Communities* (2001), Cotton identified the following five key elements of successful SLCs:

Self-determination—Autonomy in decisionmaking, physical separateness, self-selection of teachers and students, and flexible scheduling must all be present to allow small learning community members to create and realize their own vision.

Identity—Small learning communities profit from developing a distinctive program of study that originates in the vision, interests, and unique characteristics of their members.

Personalization—Small learning community members know each other well. Teachers are able to identify and respond to students’ particular strengths and needs.

Support for Teaching—SLC teachers assume authority as well as responsibility in educating their students. School leadership does not reside only in the administrative staff; administrators teach, and teachers lead.

Functional Accountability—SLC teams use performance assessment systems that require students to demonstrate their learning and the SLC to demonstrate its success.

This publication draws on research and practice accrued to date to identify on-the-ground strategies that realize the five SLC elements described above. The knowledge base encompasses research on a variety of approaches to small unit organization: small schools and career academies; small learning communities; houses; and schools-within-schools, which tend to be organized around curriculum themes. In order to term a SLC strategy a best practice, at least two research studies had to identify it as a feature of SLCs found to have positive effects on student achievement. In sum, this body of research helped to answer the question “What constitutes optimal small learning community practice?”

The best practices are organized into five areas of SLC operation to facilitate comprehensive planning of small learning communities. The five domains of SLC practice do not comprise a

particular SLC model. Rather the domains represent interdependent spheres of activities and capture key dimensions of effective SLCs.

The tree image shown in Figure 1 illustrates the nature of the relationships among the five domains. The structural supports for a tree's foliage are its branches. In SLCs, teaching and learning teams—the interdisciplinary teams of teachers and the students they instruct—are the basic structural supports for SLC work that results in student learning. Each branch supports three clusters of leaves, the oxygen-generating element of the tree. One leaf cluster includes rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction practices; a second leaf cluster encompasses inclusive program practices; and a third, continuous program improvement strategies. The branches stem from the tree trunk, the structural support for the entire tree. In like fashion, SLCs depend on school/building and district-level policies and practices to support their growth and sustain their operation.

Each domain—and set of SLC practices belonging to it—are described briefly below and in greater detail in separate sections of this publication. The effectiveness and implementation of particular practices depend on the implementation of others, and it is their combined action that mostly likely produces a meaningful impact. Consequently, as the tree image suggests, it is important to consider the five areas and the individual practices as pieces of a larger whole.

Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Teams

The branches

SLC practice begins with interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams: the fundamental building blocks of 21st century schooling. Successful teams occupy the center of not only teaching and learning, but also program improvement efforts and school and district-level policymaking. Teachers organize themselves into interdisciplinary teams. They also organize around the students the team shares in common. Team members share time to collaborate on program design, lead learning activities, and troubleshoot students' progress over multiple years of study.

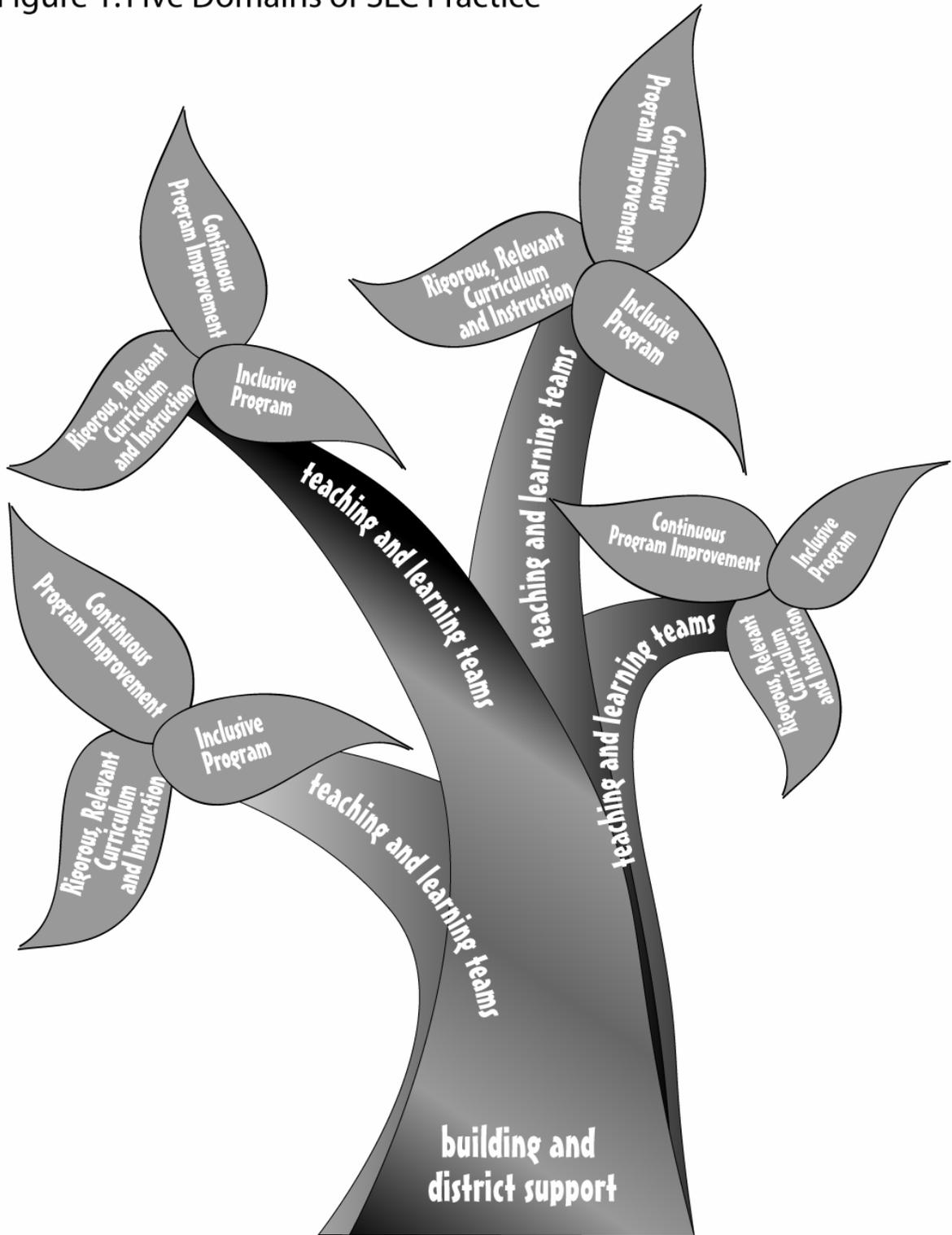
The student group is kept small by design, never exceeding more than a few hundred members. Students come to know each other and their teachers well. That is because SLC teams organize instruction to gain more instructional time with fewer students and SLC teams stay with students for more than a year.

Rigorous, Relevant Curriculum and Instruction

First leaf cluster

Teaching and learning teams position teachers to form meaningful relationships with students as well as facilitate a more authentic, active form of student learning. Without the considerable autonomy and flexibility that teaching and learning teams bestow, it is extremely difficult for teachers to design student work that is both challenging and personally meaningful to students.

Figure 1: Five Domains of SLC Practice



SLC: Implementing and Deepening Practice

With a large block of time, the interdisciplinary team can organize fieldwork, involve community partners, and allow students to go where their questions lead them. Teams can integrate discipline-based content in learning activities to create program coherence, opportunities for learning content in different contexts, and connection to real world issues.

Inclusive Program and Practices

Second leaf cluster

Small learning community practice offers a student-centered approach to reducing the achievement gap that exists among students of different educational, cultural, and social class backgrounds. In successful SLCs, students choose to enter a particular SLC on the basis of their curricular interests and irrespective of their history of achievement. SLC teams include educational specialists, collaborate with students' parents, use time and resources flexibly, and tailor instruction to meet all students' needs for mastering challenging curricula.

Ineffective SLCs replicate or even exacerbate existing inequities in educational opportunities. Regional educational laboratory staff members who monitor implementation of federally funded SLC projects found that schools often form SLCs around existing honors and Advanced Placement courses for high achieving students and programs for at-risk students. They seldom include special education students in SLC classes. For this reason, implementation of inclusive SLC programs and practices demands special attention.

Continuous Program Improvement

Third leaf cluster

Integral to SLC teaching and learning is the interdisciplinary team members' inquiry into the effectiveness of their practices. Descriptions of research-based practices are abstractions of the activities and routines that teams and students actually follow in schools. The actual activities reflect the unique conditions and needs of the particular teams and students involved. Consequently, an integral part of the work of teacher teams is disciplined reflection on their practice to ensure that all students are learning. Teams' reflection on practice is never-ending: implementation of curricula and learning activities requires long-term refinement and adjustment as conditions and needs are continually changing. To ensure that students continue to make progress, SLC teams engage in a continuous cycle of program improvement efforts. Teams assess their practice by analyzing student work and soliciting feedback from students, parents, and SLC partners.

Building/District-level Support for SLCs

The tree trunk

All of the above practices must be supported by building and district-level structures and policies, which form the "tree trunk." Building and district practices constrain what teachers and students are able to do. For SLCs to flourish, the larger school and district

must operate in a manner that supports them. A fundamental requirement for making the kind of adjustments necessary to support SLCs is to give teachers and their students a major role in decisionmaking.

Ecological Facts of SLC Implementation and Practice

Fact 1. SLC organization and curriculum and instruction are mutually supportive practices, dependent on one another to realize positive effects on student learning.

Small is not enough is a refrain of small learning community initiatives around the country (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Wasley, et al., 2000). Small size creates the conditions to carry out student work that is active and collaborative. Small size is not an end in itself. Teachers who lack knowledge of and training in innovative teaching practices may not be able to envision what comes after creation of a small community.

The converse is also true. Innovation in curriculum and instruction alone is not sufficient to increase student learning. As detailed in the next section, the size of the school community, establishing an interdisciplinary team, and providing common planning time also matter. Educators, who are otherwise enlightened about curriculum and instruction, may still underestimate the importance of the structure within which they work (Cuban, 1993). As a result, they overestimate the extent to which structural reforms have actually been made (Jackson, 1990).

Researchers repeatedly find that implementation of the structural elements of small learning communities is incomplete (Ferner, et al., 1997; Oxley, 2001). An interdisciplinary team lacks common planning time or teaches only a few of its classes in the small learning community; a small learning community has hundreds of students, offers only a few courses, or fails to admit a mix of students. Such missing structural elements prevent teachers from realizing the fruits of their planned curriculum and instruction improvements.

Significant investments of time, effort, and funds in professional development and curriculum and instruction planning are needed to transform small communities into small *learning* communities. Without implementation of key SLC organizational structures, these investments are quickly dissipated. Teachers become cynical, reluctant to try again. This is the history of school reform that faculty members at most any high school can recite.

Fact 2. Small learning community practices cannot be fully implemented unless the larger organization also changes to accommodate the new practices.

An inconvenient fact of small learning communities is that they cannot be simply *added on* to the existing school organization (Cook, 2000; Oxley, 2001). The larger school structures and operations limit small learning communities in three ways:

1. Traditional practices in place at the building level often compete with those in small learning communities. When administrative, counseling, and special education staff

- continue to operate at the school level, they carry out their roles without the intimate knowledge of students that small learning community staff have. In turn, small learning community staff members are unable to engage in decisionmaking and student support that maximize their responsiveness to student needs.
2. The simultaneous operation of old and new forms of school organization is less cost-efficient in a time of already inadequate resources. Under these circumstances, fledgling small learning communities seldom receive the levels of staff, materials, and space they require to function optimally. Grants used to establish small learning communities may obscure this fact, but only until the funds expire.
 3. Practices that are inconsistent or contradictory with small learning community practices communicate that small learning community practices are exceptions to more general, higher, or better “laws” governing education. The continued existence of older practices seems to say that small learning communities constitute a remedy only for certain students (e.g., students who are low achieving, in transition to high school, or in the last years of high school) or one that is possible only under special budgetary conditions.

Informing Versus Prescribing SLC Practice

The five domains of research-based practices provide more precise information about the shape of reforms needed to establish effective small learning communities. They provide guidance, but they may also seem to threaten practitioners’ spirit of local innovation.

It is important to recognize that the research-based practices identified here are abstractions of the highly varied practices actually in place in the schools studied. It seems likely that the particularities of local practice are part of what makes an SLC successful—building on the school’s unique history and character. In other words, the personalization and local identity of SLC reforms may be as important to their implementation success as personalization and identity are to students’ academic success.

This publication intends to inform school staffs, not to prescribe their practice. It is a resource for staff members’ own informed discussions about how to improve their practice.

2. *Cultivating Effective Small Learning Communities*

The Cycle of Continuous Program Improvement: Seven Steps

Implementing effective small learning community practice involves a cyclical process of program improvement. All quality educational programs require continual reassessment to remain vital. Moreover, by regularly examining their practice, teachers model openness to learning that is important for students to observe and absorb.

Program improvement cycles may be short or long. They can occur on a daily, weekly, quarterly, or annual basis depending on the desired depth and breadth of review. Regardless, a complete cycle involves the seven basic steps depicted in Figure 2 and described below.

The tools for following the steps to improvement are included in this section and in the Appendix. The particular tools to be used at each step are indicated in italics below. A set of tools tailored to each domain of practice is also included in this publication; go to the *Tools* tab at the end of each section to find the set for that domain.

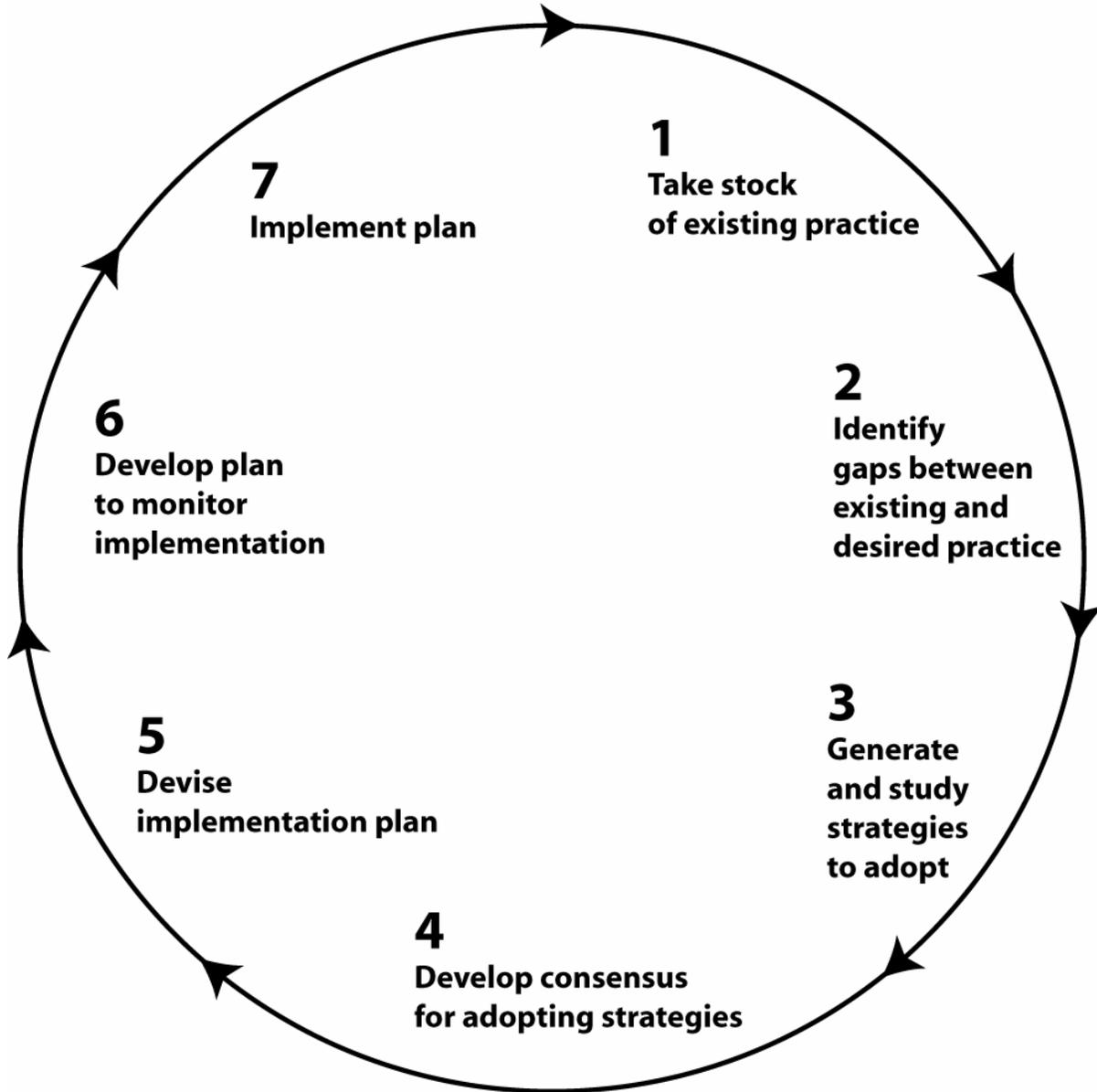
Step 1. Take stock of existing practice

The first step in the continuous improvement cycle is reflection on practice. Meaningful reflection entails critical examination of current activities through a team-based process of describing practices, reviewing data on their impact, and comparing them to research-based practices.

Self-Assessment in Five Domains. The Self-Assessment in Five Domains tool (Appendix) presents research-based SLC practices along with three possible ways to implement each practice. The different versions of each practice are arrayed on a five-point scale to indicate their likely impact on students: low, intermediate, and high.

The tool asks staff to **describe existing practice using evidence gathered from those involved, and then rate its likely impact on the five-point scale.** Development of a thorough description—containing information such as number and types of students and staff involved; duration and sequence of activities; and materials used—is itself a substantive act of review and reflection. Adequate description of some practices requires evidence of colleagues’ and students’ perceptions of the practice. For example, only students can say whether the curriculum is relevant to them, and only teachers can say whether they have been able to use planning time as they originally intended. Staff members often gain a different sense of what is taking place when they collectively examine concrete evidence and consider other colleagues’ or students’ perceptions.

Figure 2: Continuous Improvement Cycle



SLC: Implementing and Deepening Practice

Even if staff members have not yet implemented SLCs per se, they most likely use practices related to those in each of the five SLC domains and can compare them to the latter.

Example: Staff members may currently have in place language arts/social studies blocks. They can compare these instructional blocks to the SLC practice of organizing a team of teachers of language arts, social studies, math, and science around a shared group of students.

Example: Staff members may have planning time but only for individual teacher preparation and academic area collaboration. They can compare these to the SLC practice of providing common planning time for interdisciplinary team members.

Step 2. Identify gaps between existing and desired practice

Identify Gaps between Existing and Desired Practice. Describing and rating existing practice relative to a research-based standard helps to clarify the gap between existing and desired practice. It also helps staff members identify what needs to be done to close the gap. The *Identify Gaps* tool (page 11) asks staff members to **identify what is needed beyond what is already in place** to realize best practices in each domain.

Descriptions of each best practice may point out to staff additional needs for improvement. The task is to describe the needs as fully as possible before beginning to identify particular programs or techniques that might be adopted to meet these needs. In this way, staff can avoid latching onto ‘solutions’ that incompletely address the true extent of needs. For example, in order for teachers to teach more than half their classes in their SLC, a Teaching and Learning Team best practice, they may need to teach three instead of two classes in their SLC. But a related need may be to increase teachers’ commitment to or appreciation for the SLC approach and/or ability to teach some of the content they enjoyed teaching outside the SLC inside it.

Step 3. Generate and study strategies to adopt

Analyze Strategies to Adopt. Identifying the gaps between existing and desired practice leads to the next step of generating and studying one or more approaches to closing the gap. The *Analyze Strategies to Adopt* tool (page 12) asks staff members to **generate specific strategies** that staff could adopt to meet identified needs for improvement. For each strategy, staff then needs to **describe:**

1. **strengths** including the needs it addresses
2. **existing school strengths or uniqueness on which the strategy builds**
3. **resource requirements**
4. **needs for change or adjustment in other areas of school operation** to accommodate the strategy

Care should be taken again to **describe as fully as possible the form strategies will take on the ground.** Including details of students and staff involved, materials needed, and location of

activities allows staff members to make a more informed decision about what strategy to adopt. The *Self-Assessment in Five Domains* tool and other research documents provide a general idea of what the practice should involve, but these examples are only abstractions of the specific approaches that each school takes.

After staff members generate strategies under each approach, they need to **identify the strengths of each approach**. Of primary importance is whether the approach meets needs listed on the *Identify Gaps* form. Other strengths could include benefits to stakeholders, in addition to students, or how consistent the approach is with other reforms being made in the school.

Another category of strengths to consider is how the particular approach builds on the existing strengths and unique qualities of the school, district, students, and community. Staff members' ability to link new strategies with the existing identity and achievements of the school ensures that existing strengths are recognized and maintained, as well as increasing the likelihood that staff and stakeholders will support adopted practices.

In order to consider each approach fully, staff members also must **identify what resources and what changes or adjustments in other areas of the school will be needed to adopt the particular approach**. Each set of strategies will have its own set of resource requirements including personnel, professional development, materials, and facilities. Some strategies may also necessitate making changes in other areas of the school's program or operations to support the new practice or ensure consistency. Changes in other areas of operation may point to the need for additional resources to accomplish this.

Step 4. Develop consensus for adopting strategies

After studying the strengths and implementation requirements of each identified set of strategies, staff members are in a good position to make decisions about adopting a particular set. Discussion of what is to be gained from each approach—as well as what will be required—should begin to clarify support for and opposition to each approach. Further clarification, study, and discussion may be needed before staff members can reach agreement. Time devoted to reaching agreement may be gained back through more successful implementation efforts. On the other hand, postponing adoption of reforms must be weighed against the costs of student underachievement.

Staff leaders should master consensus-building techniques as a skill integral to continuous program improvement.

Step 5. Devise implementation plan

Implement the Plan. To guide and help sustain implementation of chosen strategies, staff members need to **develop a plan that specifies the key activities that will take place in order to achieve successful implementation**. The previous analysis of the resource needs and barriers to implementation often points to actions needed to support implementation of a given strategy. These actions should be included in the implementation plan. Details to be included on the *Implement the Plan* tool (page 15) in an implementation plan are: **Who will be involved in**

activities? Who will take responsibility for seeing they occur? When will they take place?

The plan provides a ready reference for staff members, as well as a tool for later reflection on the planning process.

Step 6. Develop plan to monitor implementation

Staff members need to assess on an ongoing basis the effectiveness of their efforts to improve practice. As part of their self-assessment, staff members may need to maintain records of their own and students' work; construct simple tools for gathering input from students and other stakeholders; administer annual student and/or parent surveys; and arrange for school records of student characteristics, attendance, and achievement to be disaggregated by learning community.

To sustain these data collection activities, staff members must make them a part of their regular school routine as opposed to a special task that occurs at a special time outside the flow of other school activities. District personnel and external evaluators may assist staff members in collecting and analyzing data and in establishing routines that minimize the time and effort needed to do so. However, it is important that staff members own these routines and can easily accommodate them in the context of common planning periods and days.

Gauge Success. As a guide to data collection, the *Gauge Success* tool (page 16) asks staff members to **identify**:

- 1. specific, measurable objectives of reforms**
- 2. how objectives will be measured**
- 3. when objectives will be measured**

Written statements of objectives also provide stakeholders with a clear rationale for reforms.

Reform objectives should relate to both student learning and staff practice. Staff members may also find it helpful to specify more immediate as well as longer-range objectives of reforms. Articulating early indicators of the success of reforms—such as whether students find learning activities meaningful and challenging—gives staff members more information about what aspects of reform are working and what may be influencing student achievement outcomes.

Student learning remains the bottom-line indication of whether reforms are successful or not. Student attendance and engagement of schoolwork are instrumental to learning. The summary of research on practices identified in each SLC domain describes relationships between practices and outcomes. In general, rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction appear to enhance student engagement and learning. Inclusive programs and practices appear to do the same, as well as narrow the learning gap among students of different income and ethnic groups.

For each expected outcome specified, staff members should identify the measures they will use to gauge outcomes and when data collection will occur. This exercise helps staff members anticipate the kinds of data they may need to collect during the course of their work rather than at the end. In addition, the task of identifying measures of outcomes forces staff members to reach agreement about what constitutes an appropriate measure. Discussion of what legitimate

measures are also helps clarify staff members' notions about expected outcomes and may lead to rethinking them. Data collection activities should be included in the implementation plan.

Step 7. Implement plan

Staff members implement the plan of activities and note adjustments in what was carried out by whom and when. Staff members consult the plan routinely to ensure that activities are completed, especially tasks such as data collection that may get lost in the day-to-day press of teaching.

How To Pursue Continuous Program Improvement: Working the Steps

Developing highly functioning and effective learning communities is difficult work that is never finished. For that reason, it is extremely important for staff to establish productive continuous program improvement routines and structures. A key question then is how to accommodate continuous improvement within the press of ongoing school activities. Here are some specific strategies to consider:

Take inventory of all existing school improvement projects. Before school leaders begin any continuous improvement process, they should identify all existing school improvement projects, partners, and funds. The aim of taking inventory of all school improvement activities is to develop consistent objectives across projects and combine funds wherever possible to create and pursue a coherent program of school improvement. Increasing overlap among projects will greatly enhance overall progress towards school improvement.

During any given year schools may be involved in a number of different school improvement activities. Different school staff members may be assigned to different projects with the following results: staff members do not know about what activities others are pursuing; different groups compete for the same resources, including administrative support and adequate numbers of staff to plan and carry out work. Worst of all, groups develop programs and reforms that are at odds with each other. For example, academic department leaders work on implementing standards-based reforms while SLC teams create integrated curricula for small learning communities. Because no cross-collaboration occurs, the reforms conflict with each other and give the appearance of inherent incompatibility. Conflicting camps develop as some staff supports one type of reform and others another.

School reform efforts often proceed along different channels when, in fact, they share the same general objectives. Staff must make a concerted effort to ensure that reform initiatives mutually enhance one another and that each contributes to an overarching, shared vision of effective schooling.

Create time to collaborate. Adopt a school schedule that provides for early release or late start days on a regular basis. Planning grants compensate school staff members for the extra time they spend planning, but if the school schedule does not also accommodate routine staff collaboration, planning grants create an artificial set of conditions that evaporate at the end of the grant.

Reallocate some of the existing time meted out to department and full faculty meetings to small work groups with the charge of studying and making recommendations about school reform. Allow them to report out to one another regularly via email and in person.

Create small groups to work on different areas of reform. Whole-school reform is too large and complex an undertaking to assign to a single group of staff members. Consider creating a small work group of four to six people to study developing and implementing strategies within each of the five domains of SLC practice. Each group could direct its work to answering an essential question related to its domain of SLC practice:

Interdisciplinary teaching and learning teams: *How can we maximize interdisciplinary teams' time, support, and flexibility to work together and with their students?*

Rigorous, relevant curriculum and instruction: *How can we make curriculum and instruction more authentic, coherent, and challenging to students?*

Inclusive program and practices: *How can we create inclusive instructional groups based on student interest and provide adequate support for all students in these groups to meet high standards for learning?*

Continuous program improvement: *What procedures, tools, and partners do interdisciplinary teams need to pursue continuous improvement of their SLC?*

Building and district support: *What building and district-level policies and practices need to be aligned and reformulated to maximize support for the operation of SLCs?*

Include diverse stakeholders as members of each group. Study groups should be interdisciplinary and include students, parents, community members, administrators, counselors, and other school staff members. Considerations for diversity must not overwhelm the need to keep groups to four to six members. Devote attention to supporting participation of students, parents, and community members who may find it less convenient to attend than do school staff members. Advance agendas, telephone/e-mail reminders of meeting dates, and refreshments at meetings may strengthen attendance.

Employ group collaboration strategies designed to optimize discussion and build consensus. Numerous strategies have been developed to facilitate productive group work. Many schools use them routinely. They prove their worth. They make it possible to balance leadership with broad participation in decisionmaking, and speed and efficiency with careful, systematic study of the issues. Some useful strategies included in *Tools* in this section can help the group:

- **Keep on track.** Group leaders can and should assemble an agenda for each meeting beforehand but then solicit items at the meeting from other group members. Group members can also weigh in on how much time they want to spend on each item or whether to reserve discussion of particular items for another meeting.

The group may wish to have a member with good group facilitation skills facilitate meetings. The group facilitator functions only to keep the meeting on track and refrains from participating in discussions.

- **Build consensus.** Group leaders can ask group members to indicate their level of agreement on issues at several points in the discussion to determine whether the group needs to discuss an issue further or is ready to vote. *Fist-to-five* voting (one finger means complete agreement and five means complete disagreement) allows group members to indicate how far away from agreement they are without engaging in lengthy explanations.
- **Encourage openness.** Group leaders can quickly surface members' sentiments about an item in question by asking all members to express what they're thinking or feeling briefly without explanation or detail.
- **Encourage thinking outside the box.** Group leaders can ask members to brainstorm ideas and solutions with the goal of generating as many as possible without consideration for feasibility or acceptance. Analysis and judgment of the items can be reserved for a later time.

Closely inspect data. It's difficult sometimes to make sense of data. They may not be arranged in an optimal form. They may not speak directly to the point, and they do not speak for themselves. It is very important for group members to spend time closely inspecting the data before drawing conclusions. To facilitate thorough consideration of data, group members should first:

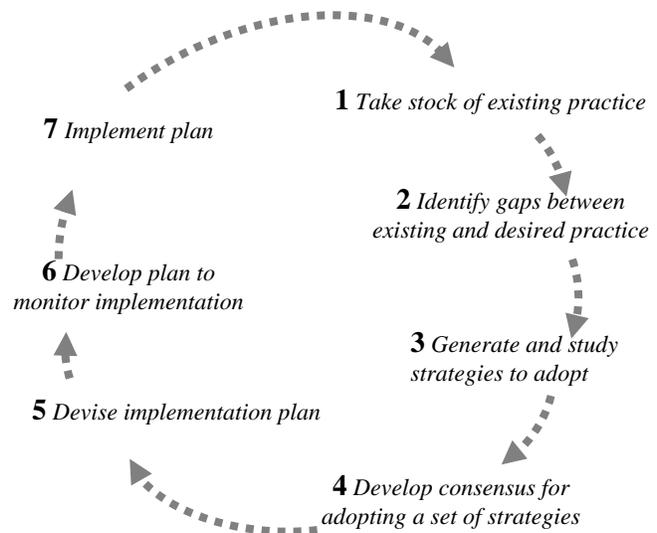
1. Ask questions about the nature of the data; for example, ask how they were collected and calculated
2. Note what they see in the data and what the data may show

Exchange work with other groups to broaden input. As pointed out in the first section of this guide, the success of practices in one domain is connected with practices in other domains. Study groups cannot work in isolation from one another for very long. At regular intervals, groups should summarize their discussion points and conclusions and share summaries in writing and in person with the other groups. Each group should invite the other groups' questions and suggestions, note their input, and directly address it in the next round of work.

3. *Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Teams*

Best Practices Checklist:

- SLC interdisciplinary team (or teams) is organized around no more than a few hundred students**
- Interdisciplinary team remains with students for multiple years of study**
- Teachers have more than half-time assignment to SLC**
- Interdisciplinary team has common planning time**
- Interdisciplinary team actively collaborates on curriculum, instruction, and student progress**
- Building space is sufficient to create a home base for collaboration**



Research and exemplary SLCs demonstrate...

IN A NUTSHELL

...that the size of the learning community affects the quality of students' relationships with peers and teachers and ultimately students' educational outcomes. In smaller schools students are more likely to form relationships that bind them to school, and teachers are better able to identify and respond to students' needs. Small learning communities are maximally effective when interdisciplinary team members share students in common and are thereby able to pool their knowledge of students, communicate consistent messages, and create coherent instructional programs. Common planning time is essential for team collaboration. Team collaboration heightens teachers' shared sense of responsibility for students' learning. Teams that instruct most of their classes in the SLC avoid conflicts with teaching responsibilities outside the team that might make team collaboration and the scheduling of common planning time difficult. Dedicated building space also facilitates team collaboration and in addition reinforces students' identification with the SLC.

Why These Practices Are Essential

SLC interdisciplinary team (or teams) is organized around no more than a few hundred students

SLC interdisciplinary team. The central feature of a high-functioning SLC is an interdisciplinary team (or teams) of teachers who work closely together with a group of students they share in common for instruction. Traditional schools organize teachers around subject areas. SLCs organize teachers across subject areas to create a more student-centered form of schooling. Researchers find that SLC teachers enjoy greater interdisciplinary collaboration and consensus (Oxley, 1997b) and instructional leadership, including program coordination (Wasley, et al., 2000) than teachers in traditional schools.

No more than a few hundred students. Decades of research on school size provide substantial evidence that smaller high schools are associated with more favorable student outcomes than larger high schools (Cotton, 2001; Gladden, 1998). Smaller high schools have unmistakably greater holding power: students are less likely to drop out, more likely to attend, and more likely to participate in school activities (Lindsay, 1982; Pittman & Haughwout, 1987). Smaller high schools experience less student disorder and violence (Garbarino, 1978; Gottfredson, 1985).

And smaller high schools—despite having a more restricted set of curricular offerings—are associated with greater academic achievement (Fowler & Walberg, 1991) although the findings are more mixed. Recent more precise analysis has been able to tease out the effect of size from that of other factors that vary with school size. This research points out that smaller high schools are not only associated with higher achievement but greater equity in achievement (Lee & Smith, 1995). That is, the achievement gap usually found among students of different ethnicities is reduced in smaller high schools.

Exactly *how small* should a small learning community be? This is obviously one of the central questions in establishing small learning communities. One study of high schools—not small learning communities—suggests that a size of 600 is an appropriate target (Lee & Smith, 1997). But this finding pertains to schools with traditional curriculum and instruction organization. It is also inconsistent with a basic premise of small learning communities—that all members of the community know each other—since it is impossible for teachers to know even the names of more than 500 students (Panel on Youth, 1973).

Small learning community practice counsels smaller schools of 200–400 (Cook, 2000; Fine, 1994). Nationally, some of the most successful small learning communities have as few as 100 students (Anness, 1995). This size is comparable to Coalition of Essential Schools (Sizer, 1992) and National Association of Secondary School Principals (1996) recommendations that teachers instruct approximately 90 students at any one time.

These recommended small numbers of students derive from seemingly minimum standards for teaching effectively: teachers are able to get to know students' needs and interests and to provide frequent, individualized responses to student work.

Students remain with their team for multiple years

Small learning communities that have attained national prominence on the basis of their students' success encompass the entire four years of high school study (Cook, 2000; Meier, 1995). Common to prominent high school reform models that have also proven successful are small learning communities that extend across at least two years of study (<http://www.drake.marin.k12.ca>; Legters, Balfanz, & McPartland, 2002).

A mechanism of this success may be the cross-grade coherence and consistency of the academic program (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001a,b; Wasley, et al., 2000). Students are more likely to learn when new material builds on their prior knowledge (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). Moreover, students are more motivated to learn when teachers peg academic challenge just ahead of students' level of competence (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1993). Teachers in multi-year SLCs can use the knowledge they gain about students in one year to shape their subsequent learning experiences (Fine & Somerville, 1998). A second mechanism of these successful multi-year SLCs may be that they promote connections between older, more competent peer role models and younger students, another factor shown to enhance learning (Benard, 1990; Fazio & Ural, 1995).

Research indicates that small unit organization confined to just the ninth-grade level, as in interventions designed to ease students' transition to high school, has "positive though modest effects on students' academic outcomes" (Quint, Miller, Pastor, & Cytron, 1999). These researchers concluded that broader intervention was required. The "Talent Development High School" model, which combines a ninth-grade Success Academy with 10th- through 12th-grade career academies, employs a separate transition year unit subdivided into smaller groupings and a specially designed curriculum. Ninth-graders in this model passed state exams in some areas and were promoted at higher rates than before the academy was implemented (McPartland, Balfanz, Jordan, & Legters, 1998).

However, other research suggests that the Talent Development model may not be as effective as continuous ninth- through 12th-grade small learning communities (Oxley, Croninger, & DeGroot, 2000). Researchers who compared ninth-graders in a Success Academy with those in a comparable school organized into ninth- through 12th-grade SLCs reported that Success Academy students disliked being separated from the advanced students while ninth-graders in the ninth- through 12th-grade SLCs valued upper level students for "setting examples for the younger ones" and "show(ing) us around." In addition, high teacher turnover emerged as an enduring problem in the ninth-grade Success Academy unlike in the ninth- through 12th-grade SLCs where teachers also taught students at other grade levels and found satisfaction in seeing students mature into graduating seniors.

Schools that offer themed initial ninth- through 10th-grade and advanced 11th- through 12th-grade SLCs or career pathways (Allen, 2001; Legters, et al., 2002) postpone transition to advanced SLCs until students reach 11th grade. In these two-year SLCs, teachers can still capitalize on knowledge of students from one year to the next (instead of having to start afresh with each new entering class of students) and can employ upper grade students as role models. In addition, this model increases student choice and opportunities for exploration.

It is key that students advance to upper level SLCs of some kind and not to a traditionally structured school. Failure to reorganize the upper grades communicates that staff is not persuaded that SLCs represent a more effective form of schooling, appropriate for advanced students as well as those with special needs such as transition or remediation (Allen, 2001; Ready, Lee, & LoGerfo, 2000). Most often under these circumstances, lower grade SLCs also suffer from lack of full implementation.

SLC team members instruct more than half their classload in the SLC

In the most successful learning communities, teachers instruct all (Cook, 2000; Meier, 1995) or at least most of their classes within their SLC (<http://www.drake.marin.k12.ca>).

Teachers who divide their time between their SLC and classes outside their SLC run the risk of shortchanging their SLC's requirements for collaboration. Successful small learning communities devote regular time to student advisement, curriculum planning, and collaboration on problems of practice in addition to individual teacher preparation. At Urban Academy, a U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon School of Excellence and small learning community of just 100 students, teachers devote one hour/week to student advisement, two-and-a-half hours every two weeks to curriculum planning, and three hours/week to a staff meeting—a total of more than five hours/week on average (Anness, 1995).

Practically speaking, it is difficult for teachers to dedicate this much time to a small learning community when it is not their primary commitment. In addition, the more classes SLC teachers instruct outside their SLC, the more difficult it is to schedule common planning time for SLC teams.

SLC team shares planning time in common

Common planning time facilitates collaboration among interdisciplinary team members. Research frequently identifies common planning time as a feature of successful teaming and academic programs linked to positive student outcomes (Felner, et al., 1997; McPartland, et al., 1998; Newmann, et al., 2001a, b; Oxley, 1997b). It is a nearly constant item on short lists of SLC practices necessary for maintaining a focus on instructional improvements (for example, <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/sslc/elements.shtml>).

Among successful small learning communities, common planning time comes during shared preparation periods during the school day (<http://www.drake.marin.k12.ca>), a

single late start or early release day each week, or a block of time during which students leave school to do community-based service/study (Meier, 1995). Common planning time does not guarantee improved teaching and learning however. Teams must devote this time to curriculum and instruction planning and problem-solving that increase program coherence and academic challenge (http://www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/pub_index.shtml; Newmann, et al., 2001a, b).

Teacher team actively collaborates on curriculum, instruction, and student progress

SLC teacher teams that spend common preparation time actively discussing and planning curriculum and instruction improvements, as well as troubleshooting student progress, contribute to small learning communities' effectiveness (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Oxley, 1997b; Wasley, et al., 2000).

Successful small learning communities do not appear to depend on extraordinary individuals as much as on regular collaboration (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Wasley, et al., 2000). Collegial exchange among team members serves to broaden input and deepen consideration of the educational problems they face. Aness' (1995) description of a problem-solving session held by staff of a successful SLC provides a compelling illustration of a school that learns (Senge, et al., 2000). Sharing ideas and observing each other's work provides an effective form of professional development by expanding individual members' teaching repertoires and socializing new team members (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002).

Team members' collaboration also engenders a sense of shared responsibility for their students' success (Wasley, et al., 2000). Teams able to pull together in the same direction across disciplines and grades felt more efficacious and committed to students' ongoing learning than teachers working in traditional schools.

Building space is sufficient to create a home base for SLC collaboration

Physical proximity of the SLC interdisciplinary team's classrooms is a requirement for effective small learning community functioning.

Research repeatedly finds that physical proximity is instrumental to key small learning community functions. Physical proximity of teachers' classrooms facilitates teacher collaboration (Christman, Cohen, & Macpherson, 1997; Wasley, et al., 2000), promotes interaction among teachers and students (Aness, 1995; Oxley, 1990), and helps to establish a separate identity and sense of community among members (Raywid, 1996).

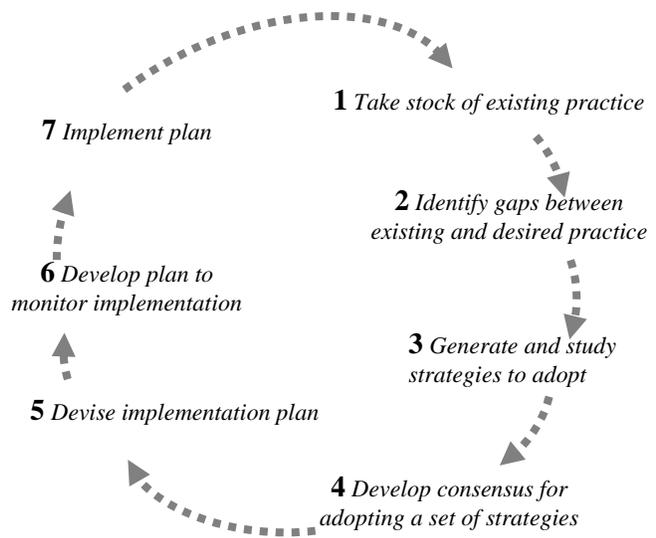
Small learning communities may *make do* with a single, large classroom or pair of adjacent classrooms. However, teacher collaboration and students' identification with their SLC will likely suffer. The inability to designate more adequate space may also reflect a lack of schoolwide commitment to SLCs and the need to make painful adjustments to optimize their functioning. Other SLC requirements are likely to be compromised as well.

In contrast, SLCs that provide a space where teachers and students can interact before and after class generate a feeling of belonging and a clear sense that teachers care about students: "... students learn that a school can be both educational and personal." (Acess, 1995, p. 8).

4. *Rigorous, Relevant Curriculum and Instruction*

Best Practices Checklist:

- Interdisciplinary curriculum organized around topics of interest to students and essential skills/ knowledge**
- Rigorous, standards-based curriculum**
- Minimum half-day block of instruction**
- Collaboration with community partners**
- Active, authentic student inquiry**



Why These Practices Are Essential

IN A NUTSHELL

Research and exemplary SLCs demonstrate...

...authentic pedagogy involving active student inquiry into real world problems with requirements for in-depth study and critical evaluation of information is associated with higher student achievement than traditional curriculum and instruction. SLCs with documented success are those that have created engaging interdisciplinary curricula through collaboration with community-based partners and at the same time established high standards for student proficiency in key discipline-based content areas. The most powerful programs encompass at least half the student's instructional day and more than one year of study. Interdisciplinary teacher collaboration on curriculum and instruction increases the program's coherence and opportunities to reinforce essential skills and knowledge across multiple contexts.

Why These Practices Are Essential

Interdisciplinary curriculum organized around topics of interest to students and essential skills and knowledge

A distinguishing attribute of successful small learning communities is a curriculum that has relevance to the world outside school and personal meaning for students.

At a minimum, courses include interdisciplinary content to give students opportunities to explore topics within authentic contexts not limited by the boundaries of academic disciplines. Curricular themes, career interests (Legters, et al., 2002; McPartland, et al., 1998), and cross-disciplinary inquiry (Ancess, 1995; Meier, 1995) create meaningful connections among courses. Courses integrate college and career preparation (Little, 1996) and blend classical studies with multi-cultural content and students' own lives and interests (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002).

A critical ingredient of an interdisciplinary program is coherence. Cross-subject as well as cross-grade teacher collaboration are essential vehicles of program coherence (Newmann, et al, 2001a,b; Wasley, et al., 2000). Research on learning and cognitive development (Bransford, et al., 1999; Caine & Caine, 1991) indicates that coherence and consistency in academic programs allow students to incorporate new understandings into prior knowledge and to alter prior knowledge when necessary. Coherent programs give students recurrent opportunities to practice and to apply knowledge and skills in new contexts.

Rigorous, standards-based curriculum

Holding all students to high standards to insure educational equity and access to post-secondary education and jobs is a centerpiece of all current major school reform initiatives (Legters, et al., 2002), including the creation of small schools and small learning communities (Fine & Somerville, 1998). Successful small learning communities establish standards for student proficiency that agree with the community's goals and values and at the same time equal or exceed state standards (Ancess, 1995).

In practical terms, holding high standards for academic achievement means offering a strong core curriculum to all students (Sizer, 1992). To accomplish this, staff must first eliminate academic tracks and courses that water down content (<http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/background/brochure.asp>) and provide support sufficient to enable all students to access the core curriculum (Weinstein, 1996).

SLC encompasses at least a half-day block of students' instructional day

Small schools advocates argue that students' entire school day must be organized within their small learning community in order to give teachers the degree of autonomy and flexibility they need to be responsive to students (Fine & Somerville, 1998).

Research shows that small units that encompass half the student's instructional day have favorable effects on students' sense of community and academic achievement (Felner & Adan, 1988; Felner, et al., 1997; McMullan, Sipe, & Wolf, 1994; Oxley, 1990, 1997b). In all cases, the half-day arrangement included courses in four core academic disciplines. Students in half-day units were assessed relative to those in no unit or units organized around only one or two classes; they were not compared to students in all-day units. Consequently, it is not possible to say how much stronger the effect of an all-day arrangement may be.

What is clear from both research and practice is that students register much less sense of community from a two-course block such as the language arts/social studies blocks frequently found in high schools (Oxley, 1990; Oxley, et al., 2000). Moreover, teachers report that splitting up the SLC block of classes among classes outside the community also diminishes the small learning community's impact.

SLC teachers collaborate with community partners

Teachers in successful small learning communities create collaborative relationships with community partners. Teachers work with community partners to design curricula grounded in real-world work and service (Acess, 1995). Community partners enable teachers to extend classwork into community contexts related to the topics and problems under study (Allen, 2001).

Collaboration with community partners also presents opportunities to conduct more authentic assessment of student work by including outside experts in the review process (Acess, 1995). Community partner participation is also vital to teachers' reflection on their own work and continuous program improvement efforts (Christman, et al., 1997). Community partners can be an important source of outside, yet informed, opinion about the SLC program.

Students engage in active, authentic inquiry

Students in successful small learning communities actively explore topics, problems, and questions and produce authentic demonstrations of their knowledge (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Meier, 1995; Oxley, 1997b).

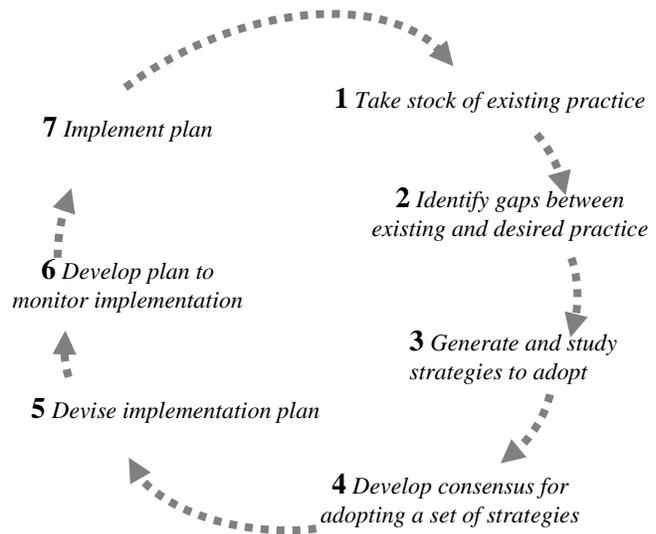
SLC students play an active role in designing and carrying out academic work. They help teachers identify problems to study, questions to research, books to read, and methods of demonstrating their knowledge and understanding (Acess, 1995; Meier, 1995). They work individually and collaboratively using class conversations to express and revise their thinking. They work inside classrooms and in the community alongside individuals with authentic expertise in the problem area under study. SLC students frequently engage in project-based learning that requires them to collect and critically analyze information, defend their conclusions, and make in-depth oral and written presentations of their findings (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Meier, 1995; Wasley, et al., 2000).

Research finds that student work that involves this active mode of acquiring knowledge—authentic pedagogy—is linked to heightened student achievement (Newmann, et al, 1995a,b).

5. *Inclusive Program and Practices*

Best Practices Checklist:

- SLC membership is based on teachers' and students' interest and choice to ensure equitable access**
- Teachers use time and space flexibly to meet needs of all students**
- Teams tailor instruction to diverse students' needs**
- Special education and ELL instructors are integral members of SLC teams**
- Counselors are integral members of SLC teams**
- Teams advise/mentor students**
- Teams collaborate with parents**



Why These Practices Are Essential

IN A NUTSHELL

Research and exemplary SLCs demonstrate...

... students' and teachers' choice of their SLC on the basis of its curricular program is more likely to create memberships in which teachers and students share the same interests and goals while the students themselves vary in social class, ethnicity, and history of academic achievement. SLCs that use pedagogical style as the basis of choice or random assignment to determine membership generate less diverse student groups and less buy-in, respectively. Practices associated with success in serving diverse students in SLCs include SLC teams comprising special and ELL educators, subject-area teachers, and counseling staff; student advisement; and parent collaboration. Teachers combine these collaborative arrangements with instruction tailored to students' diverse needs in high-functioning SLCs. Adapting instruction to students' needs includes using the flexibility afforded by SLC organization to make multiple, varied arrangements for learning.

Why These Practices Are Essential

SLC membership is based on student and teacher interests and choice

Small learning community research and practice indicate that success depends in large part on a self-chosen membership that shares a commitment to the SLC's unique focus or mission (Allen, 2001; Ancess, 1995; Cook, 2000; Meier, 1995).

Students' ability to choose their small learning community is consistent with a student-centered approach to education. Use of random assignment or admissions criteria to determine SLC membership eliminates the freedom students have, even in traditional schools, to match their interests with the courses they take. However, traditional schools offer choice in courses at the expense of program coherence and sense of community. SLCs can offer choice at the program level, if not the course level, and—with sufficient flexibility—can also provide many choices within the program.

Students' exercise of choice of SLC places a premium on informing middle school students and their parents about high school SLC programs. Student choice also challenges schools to develop a set of SLC programs that responds to a range of students' interests and offers equal challenge and opportunity for success.

If school staff meets these challenges, the payoff appears to be more informed and empowered students and potent learning communities where members have the opportunity to develop their interests with teachers and with peers who share them. In a study of high schools organized into small learning communities, researchers compared students who chose an SLC on the basis of curriculum theme with those who were randomly assigned to a sub-unit (Oxley, et al., 2000). In the two study schools whose SLCs are organized around curriculum themes and career interests, entering students generally chose SLCs different from those their best friends selected and got to know students they otherwise would not have met. In these schools, students developed positive identifications with SLC teachers and peers based on shared learning interests and styles. In the third study school with transition-year sub-units to which students are randomly assigned, students struggled to overcome their teachers' negative perceptions of first-year students and to distinguish themselves from less serious students.

SLCs whose curricular programs intentionally or unintentionally attract lower or higher-achieving students create tensions among SLCs and long-term instability of small unit organization (Oxley, 2001; Ready, et al, 2000). In the study described above (Oxley, et al., 2000), researchers also compared students in schools with SLCs organized around curricular emphases with students in a fourth school whose SLCs were organized around differing pedagogical philosophies (e.g., cooperative learning). Students in SLCs organized around pedagogy style tended to choose an SLC on the basis of friends' choices and parents' beliefs about the SLC's effectiveness and level of difficulty. These SLCs became identified with relatively homogeneous groups of students in terms of ethnicity, social class, gender, and academic aspirations.

SLCs organized around curricular themes are not immune to attracting socially or academically homogeneous groups of students. For example, Wasley, et al. (2000) found that schools-within-schools, especially those with math and science themes, tended to attract higher achieving students than the host school's traditional classes.

SLC staff members' ability to hold equally high standards and provide students an equal opportunity to succeed is vital. Randomly assigning students to SLCs neither ensures equal standards and opportunities nor engenders the kind of student motivation and interest that curricular themes do.

Counselor works as integral member of SLC team

School counselors are assigned to particular SLCs in order to work closely with SLC teams in responding to students' needs. In this way, counselors and teachers are more likely to intervene with students in an informed and consistent manner.

Staff members of successful small learning communities interact with students across multiple roles and contexts: as teacher, advisor, student admissions coordinator, and so on (Ancess, 1995; Oxley, 1990, 1997b). In such communities, counselors use their individual and group process skills to help teachers organize student advisories, parent conferences, and classroom groups as well as to counsel students (Oxley, 1993). Counselors with teacher certification may also teach in the SLC.

Special educators/remediation specialists work as integral members of SLC team

Teaching specialists, including special education staff, are assigned to SLCs and work closely with the teacher teams to organize and carry out instruction and student support (Oxley, 1993, 1997a,b).

Specialists' integration with teacher teams replaces the traditional school practice of addressing students' learning needs in separate, specialized contexts apart from mainstream classrooms. Integrated teams—with their augmented range of expertise—work with inclusive classes to provide consistent instructional interventions, to avoid negative student labels, and to give special education students the same choices as other students. These practices are consistent with communal school organization as well as special education inclusion (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996) and the goal of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to meet students' needs in the least restrictive environment possible.

Unfortunately, the record of small learning communities inclusion of special education students has been weak (McMullan, et al., 1994; Wasley, et al., 2000). Exclusion of special education students from SLCs may seem to lighten the instructional burden, but at the same time excludes special educators with pedagogical expertise needed to help content-area specialists diversify their instructional strategies. Yet, there is broad consensus that use of diverse instructional strategies holds a key to educational effectiveness (Legters, et al., 2002).

Teams make innovative flexible use of time/space to meet needs of all students

Teachers respond flexibly to student learning needs in part by taking full advantage of blocks of instructional time and physical space to organize instruction in accordance with those needs (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Kemple & Herlihy, 2004; McPartland, et al., 1998; Oxley, 1997b; Ratzki & Fisher, 1990).

Traditional schools typically require students who fail to master the curriculum in the allotted time to repeat failed classes and grades or participate in separate remedial courses or programs. SLC structure gives teachers greater flexibility to tailor instruction to the interests and needs of a heterogeneous group of students. Successful SLCs adjust instructional time on an ongoing basis. SLC teams create double as well as single periods of instruction during the week; teach extra periods of instruction in core courses to fewer classes of students by fully integrating an elective into the core program; and gather up minutes that are allocated but not needed for passing between adjacent classrooms and use them to lengthen advisory or other classes (Oxley, 1997a, b). They create advisory periods of varying lengths of time during the week and arrange for students to carry out community service to create teacher planning time (Meier, 1995). Interdisciplinary teams double instruction time in English and math permitting students to complete Algebra 1 by the end of 9th grade even if they spent the first half of the year in Pre-Algebra (Kemple & Herlihy, 2004).

Instruction is tailored to diverse students' needs

Teachers group students for specialized instruction within the team and diversify learning activities to increase routes to mastery (Legters, et al., 2002; McPartland, et al., 1998; Oxley, 1997a, b). SLC teams design and provide the support needed. A special education teacher assigned to a SLC team collaborates with four content teachers to differentiate instruction for groups that include students who are not passing tests and those who require more challenging assignments. The special educator teams with a content teacher within his/her classroom or divides the entire group of students into five smaller classes for instruction (Oxley 1997b). Teams develop multiple means for students to demonstrate equal standards of proficiency (Ancess, 1995). In sum, SLC teams take responsibility for meeting all their students' needs rather than refer students to teachers without knowledge of these students or ability to provide coherence and continuity of instruction (Wasley, et al., 2000).

Teachers advise/mentor students

Staff members of successful SLCs meet regularly with small groups of advisees to monitor and troubleshoot their academic progress (Ancess, 1995; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Oxley, 1997b; McPartland, et al., 1998).

Each SLC teacher advises and mentors a small group of students on a regular, ongoing basis as a means to further personalize teaching and learning (Legters, et al., 2002). Advisories with teacher/student ratios that range from 1:25 to 1:10 meet once a day to

once a week. Teachers discuss personal as well as academic issues of concern to students (e.g., rules, graduation requirements, difficulties students are having) and contact parents as needed.

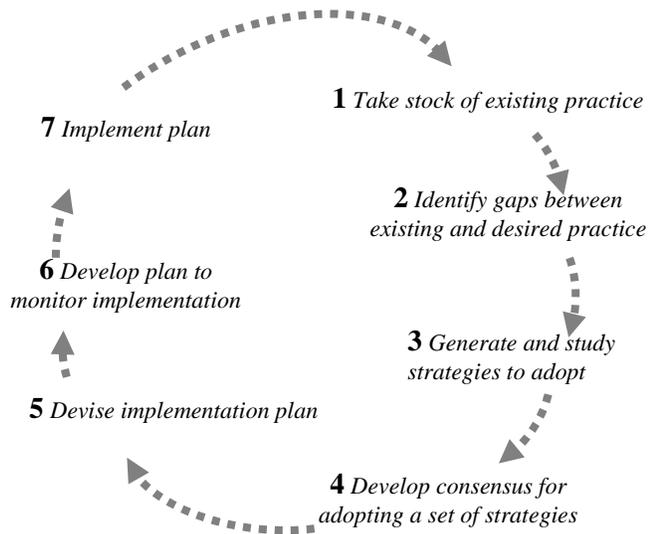
Teachers collaborate with parents

The small learning community conception of teaching and learning rests on the view that optimal teaching occurs in a context in which teachers, students, and parents know each other and share a commitment to the school's particular mission (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Oxley, 1994b). The broad base of collaboration serves to expand teachers' knowledge of students' learning needs and the means to increase the consistency of students' educational experiences. Parent collaboration allows for more consistent communication of expectations and strategies for learning, which is key to program coherence and increased student achievement (Newmann, et al., 2001a,b).

6. *SLC-Based Continuous Program Improvement*

Best Practices Checklist:

- Teams reflect on practice and engage in continuous program improvement**
- Teams use a variety of student data to reflect on practice**
- Teams use input from stakeholders and other critical friends to reflect on practice**
- Teams set and pursue professional development goals that match SLC improvement needs**



Why These Practices Are Essential

IN A NUTSHELL

Research and exemplary SLCs demonstrate...

...SLCs operate most effectively when teachers work as learning teams: they ask questions about the adequacy of their practice; gather and analyze information designed to answer their questions, and make decisions about how to modify their practice with input from students, stakeholders, and knowledgeable colleagues. Learning teams also develop their own professional development plans and as a result are better able to apply their training to program needs.

Why These Practices Are Essential

Teams reflect on practice and engage in continuous improvement with stakeholders and other critical friends

Research indicates that small learning communities will realize their promise only if SLC teams engage in a continuous process of improvement (Christman & Macpherson, 1996; Oxley, 2001).

Full implementation of small learning communities—as well as ongoing efforts to deepen practice—requires regular team reflection on practice, including analysis of students’ work and perceptions of the program. Building-level examination of student outcomes may complement SLC teams’ reflection on their practice but cannot replace it.

SLC teachers, who embody a spirit of inquiry and demonstrate an interest in learning, help to establish a *modus operandi* for the entire community (Senge, et al., 2000).

Teams use a variety of student data to reflect on practice

School staff members’ experience suggests that a variety of data is helpful to reflecting on practice. Students’ work, grades, and standardized test scores are key pieces of data to examine. Teams may also need to find out what students do after they graduate, what educational opportunities they are able to pursue, and what course levels they are able to take. This becomes practicable when SLC teachers and their partners assemble a simple telephone survey and call graduates to see what they are doing. The information they gather will tell them if students’ level of mastery of the SLC curriculum was adequate to gain them admission to higher education or job training opportunities and to avoid remedial coursework.

Teams may also find it important to gather information on incoming students’ backgrounds to determine if the SLC program succeeds in attracting a diverse group of students. Students’ ethnicity and socioeconomic status are often apparent to teachers, but systematic examination of such data may reveal patterns that teachers did not detect informally. Persistent trends in admitting students from lower or higher income levels may indicate the need to review how information about the SLC is conveyed to students and parents, as well as how students and parents experience the program once in it.

Teams use input from stakeholders and other critical friends to reflect on practice

When considering ways to improve practice, teachers can benefit from students’ routine involvement in identifying problems and weaknesses and possible solutions (Ancess, 1995). Improving practice also requires consideration of the perceptions of parents, administrators, and other teachers whose outside perspective can broaden that of SLC teachers (Oxley, 1997b). In order to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way, SLC teachers must provide them with adequate information, especially access to classrooms and student work. Research organizations such as regional educational laboratories and

universities can also help teams develop practical student data collection and analysis routines they can use on an ongoing basis (Christman & Macpherson, 1996).

Teams set and pursue professional development goals that match SLC improvement needs

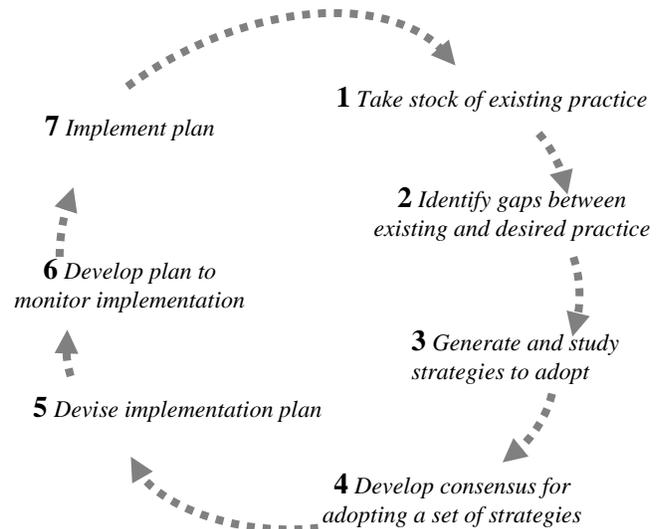
SLC teams identify and develop professional development opportunities that help them pursue their mission and specific improvement goals (Christman & Macpherson, 1996; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Wasley, et al., 2000).

SLC teams avail themselves of both external and internal professional development, but to a large extent arrange for exchanges among colleagues to enhance professional skills (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002). What is distinctive in either case is SLC teachers' own identification of the particular kind of professional development they need. As a result, SLC teachers have a better grasp than traditional teachers do of how the professional development fits with their goals and plans and how they will put new knowledge and skill to use (Wasley, et al., 2000).

7. *Building and District Support for SLCs*

Best Practices Checklist for Building-level Support:

- Buildingwide improvement goals align with SLC needs**
- Academic area goals align with SLC needs**
- Building-level provisions for professional development meet SLC needs**
- Class scheduling and staffing are adjusted to strengthen SLC programs**
- Academic track/alternative program changes are made to increase choice and challenge across all programs**
- Building-level policies are enacted to strengthen SLC self-governance**



Research and exemplary SLCs demonstrate...

IN A NUTSHELL

...SLCs that have the most success with their students are not add-ons to the existing school organization. They are the fundamental building blocks of school organization and the center of school activities. Restructuring schools in this manner depends on aligning policies and practices across all organizational units. Schools' improvement plans—including their provisions for professional development—serve the goals and objectives of SLC programs. Academic areas operate to advance SLC program development.

Successful SLCs also depend on the adoption of new principles of organizing and governing staff and students at the building level. Most centralized functions and resources, including staff, are shifted to SLCs to empower teacher cadres with extensive knowledge of students to respond effectively to students' learning needs. Administrators and content-area leaders participate directly in as well as provide necessary forms of support for SLCs. SLC program needs drive class scheduling. Staff restructures or eliminates at-risk and honors programs so that student achievement level is not a de facto determinant of SLC membership, and high standards are a feature of all programs.

Why These Practices Are Essential

Buildingwide improvement goals align with SLC needs

The school's improvement process and goals must be consistent with SLCs' practices and needs for improvement.

Numerous, unrelated school goals and reforms detract from full and faithful implementation of any one promising reform (Cohen, 1995). Frequently reforms, including SLCs, do not advance beyond an initial stage of implementation before a new reform initiative emerges and fragments existing reform efforts. School improvement efforts that encompass sustained coherent strategies are more likely to promote successful student outcomes (Newmann, et al., 2001a,b).

Academic department goals align with SLC needs

Academic department goals must support SLCs' interdisciplinary teamwork. The emphasis of instructional leadership must be to accommodate interdisciplinary needs and approaches to teaching (McMullan, 1994; Ratzki & Fisher, 1990).

Cross-disciplinary teams may operate in tandem with cross-SLC academic discipline-based teams. Both serve important ends. Academic discipline-based planning helps to ensure that interdisciplinary programs incorporate important discipline-based knowledge and skills and are aligned with content standards. Experts in curriculum integration (e.g., project-based learning) do not see academic disciplines as detractors, but rather as the wells from which interdisciplinary programs draw (Allen, 2001; Beane, 1995).

Practically speaking, however, the operation of both SLC and academic discipline-based teams can create competition for reform priorities and available planning time (McMullan, 1994; Oxley, 2001). SLC teams combine teachers from academic departments whose preferred pedagogical approaches may differ, and their efforts to develop authentic curricula often lead them to deviate from pacing and content of standardized discipline-based curricula. SLC teams' curriculum development work also requires large blocks of time while planning time must also be allocated to departments and schoolwide staff meetings. How instructional leaders resolve these conflicts says a lot about the school's commitment to small learning community/student-centered practice and ultimately decides the success of SLC implementation.

Building-level provisions for staff planning/development meet SLC needs

Building-level provisions for professional development should reflect a sustained commitment to building capacity and consensus among teachers, parents, and administrators for implementing SLC essential practices (Christman & Macpherson, 1996; Wasley, et al., 2000).

Different school improvement initiatives tend to travel along different channels, involve different groups of people, and have weak links to teacher practice (Cohen, 1995). Professional development is needed as a tool to create a coherent framework for school reform activities. Professional development should be designed to help teachers strengthen connections among their efforts to develop more engaging and authentic curricula, raise standards for student performance, and build community—in short, it should carry out a coherent vision of SLC practice (Christman & Macpherson, 1996).

Class scheduling and staffing are adjusted to strengthen SLC programs

In schools with successful small learning communities, changes in class scheduling and staffing were made to allow SLC teams to implement innovative curriculum and instruction programs (Ancess, 1995, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2002; Oxley 1990, 1997b; Ratzki & Fisher, 1990). These programs use a variety of strategies to reduce the number of students that teams instruct and to extend the amount of instructional time they have with students. Increased instructional time with fewer students allows teams to be more responsive to individual student's needs and to pursue community and project-based learning requiring large blocks of time.

Shifts in building-level staffing and class scheduling to reduce student/teacher ratios and increase instructional time include allotting more non-instructional staff time to teaching (Gambone & Associates, 2002; Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1997), folding separate remedial programs into core subject-area instruction (Miles & Darling-Hammond, 1997; Oxley, 1990, 1997b), creating more planning time for teachers (Ancess, 1995; Gambone & Associates, 2002; Meier, 1995; Oxley, 1997b) and creating a 4x4 extended-period block schedule (Gambone & Associates, 2002).

Staffs of schools qualifying for schoolwide Title I funds folded separate reading classes into regular core subject-area classes. They also assigned reading specialists to SLC teams to help organize reading-across-the-curriculum, as well as teach core subjects (Oxley, 1990, 1993). The reading classes with reduced class size were transformed into an extra period of instruction per week in each of the four core content areas. Instead of the usual practice of teaching five classes of students five periods each for a total of 25 periods per week, team members taught four classes for the same number of periods of instruction. In this way, teams reduced the number of students with which they worked from 150 to 120 and increased the amount of instructional time they had with each class.

In a school without federal funding, SLC team members who implemented project-based learning were given a project period to teach in lieu of a sixth class of students (Oxley, 2002). They used the period to extend instructional time in their core subject to pursue projects. Since each SLC teacher taught one less core subject-area class, administrators augmented staffing in these areas through reclaiming some staff members' non-instructional time.

In another transformed school, teachers in one small school work exclusively with 100 students. Each staff member carries out student advisement and admission as well as teaching to minimize the student-teacher ratio (Ancess, 1995; Raywid, 1994).

Dual certification, which some U.S. teachers and all German teachers have, is another means of allowing teachers to teach the same students across courses to reduce the overall number of students they teach. In German secondary schools, including those that have been restructured into learning communities, each teacher instructs 90 students (Ratzki & Fisher, 1990).

Academic track/alternative program changes are made to increase student choice and academic challenge across all programs and SLCs

Schools that organize small learning communities simultaneously revamp dropout programs and academic tracks in order to make student choice and academic challenge actual viable SLC educational strategies (Fine & Somerville, 1998; Oxley, 1994a, 1997b).

To the extent that small learning communities coexist with dropout and tracked programs, they become a de facto track. Students, parents, and teachers look to higher academic track courses for academic challenge, to dropout programs for remediation and socialization, and to small learning communities for something in between. Students' history of academic achievement drives program choice rather than substantive curricular interests. It is difficult for teachers and students alike to pursue high academic standards where programs imply judgments of student ability (Weinstein, 1996).

Research shows that academic tracks are associated with assignment of disproportionate numbers of white, middle-class students to higher tracks and ethnic minority, lower-class students to lower tracks (Oakes, 1985, 1995). SLCs that operate as de facto tracks replicate these social class disparities (Ready, et al., 2000) as well as the inadequacies of remedial programs (Grannis, 1991; Wong & Wang, 1994). Consequently, dropout programs and tracked courses must also offer student choice and distinctive substantive program offerings.

The necessity of school level detracking does not rule out the practice of grouping students *within* SLCs on an ad hoc and fluid basis. Several SLC models create opportunities for remediation within the SLC's elective offerings (McPartland, et al., 1998; Oxley 1993). For example, tutorial and independent study periods can be linked to core courses to provide additional support.

Building-level policies are enacted to strengthen building and SLC self-governance

A distinctive feature of successful small learning communities is SLC teams' representation and active participation in building-level decisionmaking bodies (Cook, 2000; Oxley, 2001; Ratzki & Fisher, 1990).

Governance councils in schools with small learning communities make SLC representation commensurate with SLCs' status as the major unit of building organization. These councils may contain representatives of additional groups, including special education and academic disciplines.

Administrators assume supervisory and teaching roles in SLCs in addition to carrying out building-level administrative tasks. In schools that have successfully implemented small learning communities on a schoolwide basis, the principal facilitates a shared decision making process and serves as an integral member of an SLC team (Cook, 2000; Ratzki & Fisher, 1990).

Assignment of administrators to SLCs is consistent with the idea that SLC staff members are better positioned than centralized staff to respond to their students' needs. They have more knowledge of their students, easier access, and can make consistent interventions across their students' classes. To the extent that SLC teams look out for their students' needs, including discipline, they free up centralized staff to take on instructional leadership and teaching roles within SLCs. Administrators' participation in SLCs reduces student-teacher ratios and increases the diversity of academic expertise and support available to students within their SLC. In a larger sense, administrator participation in SLCs leverages the transformation of traditional school structures that compete with small learning communities in the areas of decisionmaking and resource allocation (Oxley, 2001).

District-level Support for SLCs - Emerging Practices:

- **District standardizes policies needed to support SLC practice**
- **Policies strengthen SLC self-governance**
- **District negotiates teachers' union contract provisions to meet SLC staffing needs**
- **Provisions for professional development increase SLC teams' capacity for instructional innovation**
- **District staffing and budgeting practices give schools flexibility in allocating resources to meet SLC needs**

Studies of restructuring districts suggest...

...districts can play a supportive role in SLC development and institutionalization when they standardize policies that support SLC development across all schools, negotiate teachers' union contracts that enable SLC staff members to hire teachers needed to maintain program integrity, and shift authority to schools while holding them accountable for meeting academic standards. Increased school authority must be accompanied by increased flexibility in how school staff allocates resources including staff positions. Finally, districts can support SLCs' instructional innovation through professional development that recognizes the centrality of SLC team collaboration and resources needed for it, e.g., planning time, student data system that disaggregates data by SLC.

District standardizes policies needed to support SLC operation

Reviewing and modifying district policies to increase support for SLC development appear to offer greater advantages over granting policy waivers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Raywid & Schmerler, 2003; Rizzo, 2000). Districts will sometimes grant schools waivers from standard policies to enable staff to pursue key, innovative small learning community practices. School schedules that permit regular late starts for team planning or curricula that integrate content of multiple subject areas are examples of practices that have been impossible or difficult to pursue without exceptions to district policies. But waivers are readily rescinded or allowed to lapse under new leadership. They may also create tensions among schools operating under unequal policies. Perhaps most important, policy by waiver communicates that regular policies are adequate for most schools rather than being unresponsive to local school needs or, worse, inconsistent with new empirically-based knowledge. In such a policy environment, school staff members are less likely to persist in developing innovative practices that become optimally effective and sustainable.

District policies strengthen building-level self-governance

The general shift of decision-making authority from district to school and from school to teachers to increase their influence over school policy and practice is a key feature of successfully restructured schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Rizzo, 2000). Deregulation that provides autonomy for schools to pursue their vision of high intellectual standards including the authority to hire staff consistent with the school's vision contributes to the capacity of school staff to work well as a unit. Staffs of such schools were able to form strong professional communities capable of offering authentic pedagogy and promoting student achievement.

School autonomy in allocating resources, determining the curricular and instructional program, and scheduling the school day and year as well as autonomy in staff hiring appear to be vital to small learning community functioning (AIR & SRI, 2004). These autonomies of practice go against the grain of the traditional, top-down approach to educational management which emphasizes schools' compliance with district directives and allocates considerable resources to oversight rather than to the empowerment of school-level professionals.

District and teachers' union negotiate contract provisions for meeting SLCs' staffing needs

SLCs' unique program identities and offerings create special staffing demands and, in turn, a need for policies to fill them (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Raywid & Schmerler, 2003). In many districts, teacher hiring that is based on seniority has proven a barrier to staffing SLCs with teachers needed to carry out the SLC's particular program. A teacher with special SLC qualifications such as dual certification, ability to teach two particular levels of math, or interest in program themes can make or break an SLC's program. Districts such as New York City point the way to more flexible policies. The New York City Board of Education negotiated a teachers' union contract that allows schools to suspend seniority with 50 percent agreement of staff. The effect was to give

staff flexibility in teacher hiring without jettisoning considerations for seniority altogether. Ultimately, the teachers' union supported a peer selection process in which SLC staff members interview and select staff.

District provisions for professional development increase SLC teams' capacity for instructional innovation

District support for SLCs, particularly instructional innovation is most effective when it takes the form of a professional development strategy that strengthens the effectiveness of collaboration among SLC team members (Supovitz & Christman, 2005). Such a strategy legitimizes SLC leadership, creates opportunities for SLC teachers to meet as a team, and helps teams secure professional development tailored to their needs.

An effective district professional development strategy further builds SLC teams' capacity to improve their practice by helping teams develop data on their students' achievement. At a minimum, districts support teams' examination of their practice in relation to student outcomes by disaggregating school-level student data by SLCs and making these data available on a timely basis (AIR & SRI, 2004; Supovitz & Christman, 2005).

District staffing and budgeting practices give schools flexibility in allocating resources to meet SLC needs

Several districts altered their school staffing and funding methods to give school staffs more flexibility in allocating resources to support innovative SLC practices. For example, some districts adopted student-based budgeting which allots a given amount of dollars per pupil plus extra funds for students with special needs. This method contrasts with allocating staff positions to schools and determining teacher salaries on the basis of average teacher salaries which disadvantages schools with inexperienced teachers. Other districts continue to assign staff positions to schools but allow salaries for positions to be converted into other positions. For example, salary dedicated to an administrator position could be used instead to hire two lower level staff (Allen, L. & Steinberg, A., 2004).

Ability to allocate resources in accordance with the particular needs of small learning communities appears crucial to realizing their full potential (Miles, K. & Darling-Hammond, L., 1997). Just as existing patterns of resource allocation have evolved to support comprehensive school organization -large numbers of specialized staff, course, and tracks- so resources need to be reallocated to support small learning community practices -lower student/staff ratios, more instructional time devoted to the core curriculum, and greater integration of special needs instruction with regular instruction. This appears to be as true at the district level as at the building level.

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APPENDIX
Self-Assessment In Five Domains